

Pastor Kevin Garman

Theme: Serving Others; Servant Leadership

Scripture: Matthew 20:20-28

February 28th, 2021

“Serving God by Serving Others: For Christ so Loved the World”

Matthew 20:20-28 NRSV

20 Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favor of him. **21** And he said to her, “What do you want?” She said to him, “Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.” **22** But Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?” They said to him, “We are able.” **23** He said to them, “You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.”

24 When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers. **25** But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. **26** It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, **27** and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; **28** just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Last week, in our first week of Lent, we looked at the practice of fasting and how scripture talks about fasting with an emphasis on emptying ourselves from our apathy and worries by allowing the Holy Spirit to fill us up and send us out into our communities to live the gospel. This week’s theme is about serving Christ through serving others and using Jesus’ reply to Salome, James, and John as a reference to help understand servant leadership. My question is how do we inspire one another to serve one another? One of the first books of the Bible I remember reading and loving as a teenager was the Book of James. James says this,

James 2:14-17 NRSV

“¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷ So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

So how do we love God by loving our neighbor? Simply put, we live out our faith as we practice our faith by serving others. Rev. George provides an answer to this question by saying, “We do not have the luxury to choose *either* faith *or* works. Christian discipleship calls us to live by faith *and* to demonstrate that faith through our works” (Hovaness Donigian p 37).

There is a story Rev. George shares about a monk named Brother Lawrence, who served in the Carmelite monastery in Paris, France during the 17th century. Living in a monastery, prayer was an integral part of Brother Lawrence’s daily life. However, he prayed in ways you may not expect because Brother Lawrence believed prayer was in everything he did including his actions, his thoughts, his speech, and in both his alone time with God and with his fraternal brothers in the monastery as they worshipped. Brother Lawrence considered baking bread a prayer, running errands for others a prayer, and planting seeds in the community garden was a prayer.

Our Lenten Wednesdays, called Soup and Scripture, is not an original title I created. This was a ministry my home church in Surgoinsville, Tennessee decided was the best way to serve shut-ins who were unable to attend the services due to their physical and or mental health. The United Methodist Women took action and responded to this community need by making soup once a month on Wednesday nights and bringing a verse of scripture to read them as they visited and ate soup together. Instead of expecting others to come to Christ and the church, the UMW went to the people and brought Christ with them. They lived out the mantra of serving God by serving others.

In our scripture reading for today in Matthew, Salome, Jesus’ aunt and James and John’s mother, asks Jesus a question along with her sons. Salome is their mother and most likely Jesus’ aunt who will later witness the crucifixion as she follows Christ throughout his ministry and up until his death on the cross. Salome makes a request from Jesus to have her sons sit at the right and left hand of Jesus when the kingdom of God comes to fruition. Jesus replies she does not know what she is asking, and she does not understand Jesus does has not come to be a king of the people. Standing at Jesus’ side is not meant to be a position of prestige but standing

by Jesus means you are following the gospel passed down from prophets who have followed God's beckoning.

The other disciples get mad at this question by Salome and the response by James and John. They are jealous and probably think James and John are being a little pretentious in asking this question. Jesus realizes no one understands the type of leadership he is attempting to emphasize. Jesus brings everyone together and explains to them what servant leadership looks like. Jesus responds by debunking the traditional view of the Messiah by talking about servant leadership, because the Messiah was thought to come to earth to be the King of Jews. Jesus is also, indirectly, rejecting the idea he has come to become a Divine ruler at all, like we would have seen in Rome or Medieval Europe. He has come to serve others and by serving others he is serving God.

Rev. George says this, "As we serve others, we show our love for God. Our service is a form of prayer and devotion. When we pray for God to show love to all the world, we promise to show God's love to the world through *our* actions" (Hovaness Donigian p 39). Why does this concept of servant leadership seem so difficult for Americans? The short answer is the God of America is consumerism. Consumerism has replaced our local economies with corporate interests whose primary concern is profit. Consumerism has watered down our sense of community by forcing everything to be monetary based whether you're watching a video online, trying to receive affordable healthcare, watching television and the shows that glamorize the lives of those who live in excess, and consumerism is rapidly destroying our planet. We are all in an endless competition to have something more than one another, and it is driving us apart and is helping contribute to the divisions in our society.

Jesus calls on us to reject this mentality. He grew up in a rural town that according to the Roman Empire had no value or meaning any longer because it had served its purpose as a former military outpost. Remember in John 1:46 when Nathaniel questions if anything good can come out of Nazareth, because Nazareth was supposed to be a good for nothing dump where only poor people and working people lived. It did not have a grand temple or towering buildings in which the people could gawk at and admire. Jesus calls on us to reject this mentality by serving the last first and first last. Jesus calls on us to reject the greed and the prestige that comes with consumerism and hoarding resources from one another.

If the church is to survive the twenty first century, it is imperative we replace our consumerism with the servitude and justice of the cross. The

cross where Jesus laid down his life for his fellow neighbor in the most noble, altruistic manner to liberate us from our sin. This is not a one-time transaction, nor is it a loan in which we will accrue interest for our salvation, and it is not a subscription that will only last until we are tired of it and have moved on to something more appealing. The cost of discipleship means we must take up our cross daily to serve the people around us to make the world a better place. Are you up to the call church?

Our founder, John Wesley, and his brother, Charles, were most certainly up to the challenge. The Wesley's preached to coal miners, industrial workers, farmers, and the "nobodies" of the world that the Industrial Revolution was leaving behind in pursuit of profits. The Wesley's carried around a book called the *Primitive Physick* that gave detailed instructions on how to provide basic healthcare to those who were sick and left to die because they didn't have the money to afford private doctors. The Wesley's started the first Sunday schools to teach children how to read and provide them with an adequate education that was only provided to those who had the funding for private tutors and private schools. The Wesley's gathered to live out the gospel in prisons and mental institutions to remind the outcasts of society they were still beautiful in the eyes of their creator and still had purpose and value in the world. In the hymn Charles Wesley wrote, *A Charge to Keep I Have*, he writes this, "To serve the present age, my calling to fulfill; O may it all the powers engage to do my Master's will" (UMH 413). Servant leadership and putting the last first is the will of God and the calling in which all God's children are invited to participate in through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

What do we do when we feel hopeless or unable to make the necessary changes against the powers that be? We go to God in prayer, because this is what Jesus taught us to do, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Let us be reminded of Brother Lawrence's wisdom by allowing ourselves to be in a constant state of prayer. Let us be reminded that prayer is both a state of reverence and an action leading us to fulfill God's summons for our lives and answer the summons of the gospel. Let us be reminded that to take up our cross means we are to use both our head and our heart to spread the good news as God's presence is illuminated in the relationships of all of God's creation around us. Let us fervently and boldly answer the call of Christ and take up our cross to serve the last first and first last, because serving God is serving others. Amen.